Spring 2017

Where We Stand: a Case Study of Small Farmers' Participation in a Farmer Producer Company (Fpc) in Telangana, India

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Spring 2017

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly grateful for the support I received from a variety of individuals throughout this process. Without all of your support, these pages would not only be empty, but the journey of this project would have been entirely different. Thank you all for supporting and guiding me through this time in a variety of ways.

Thank you to Trilochan Pandey, for your seemingly endless care and compassion. Your support and thoughtfulness allowed me to succeed when I didn't think it was possible. Awadhesh Aadhar, thank you for being the light of every Monday and Thursday for me. Hearing your voice was often the encouragement I needed to keep going. To the staff of SIT Jaipur, this experience truly would not be the same without you all. Manoj-ji, Rashmi-ji, Anjani-ji, Pragya-ji, Rama-ji, Monika-ji, Uday-ji, Uttam-ji, Manish-ji and Hemendar-ji, you brought a smile to my face each and every day, and made the program center a home for me.

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. G.V. Ramanjaneyulu, for welcoming me into the CSA community and sharing your knowledge and experiences with me. Thank you to Chandrakala, for keeping me safe, for arranging my accommodations and always being a friendly face at CSA. Yadava Reddy, this project truly wouldn't have been possible without your help. Thank you for not only being a dedicated translator, but also for your guidance and your patience throughout our site visits. I would also like to thank David of the Arnold Bhavan provincial house, who warmly welcomed me and made my stay in Hyderabad enjoyable.

To my fellow students of SIT: Jaipur Spring 2017. Thank you for teaching me to think and learn in new ways, and for being a better support system

Special thank you to Dr. Judith A. Hand for being my advisor, mentor and rock. I am so lucky to have your endless encouragement—thank you for giving me a space in which I can be myself.

Lastly, thank you to my family back home for giving me this opportunity. Your willingness to learn and listen truly amazes me each and every day.

Here's to life-long learning, and many new adventures and experiences to come.

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Glossary of non-English terms and Acronyms

AFN – Alternative Food Network

FPC – Farmer Producer Company

FPO – Farmer Producer Organization

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

Jeevamrutham (Telugu) – A traditional bio-fertilizer made from cow dung and cow urine.

NGO – nongovernmental organization

Abstract

The rise of agribusiness has impacted the agricultural sector worldwide. Specifically in India, many small farmers have been negatively affected by the rise of agribusiness, as they are competing against large farms that have access to more resources and money. In recent decades, alternative food networks (AFNs) have arisen, generally as small-scale, non-governmental programs that provide a way for small farmers to find success and receive fair compensation for their crops. This study focuses on small farmers who participate in an AFN, specifically a farmer producer company (FPC) referred to as Sahaja Aharam, based in Hyderabad within the Indian state of Telangana. Using qualitative methods of in-depth interviewing, the following questions will be examined through this study: How has involvement in the Sahaja Aharam changed the work of the farmers? What impacts has this program had on farmers' personal and professional lives? How can FPCs successfully work to support and empower small farmers? The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and perspectives of small farmers in Telangana, and how they have been impacted by their involvement in Sahaja Aharam.

Keywords: Agriculture, India, alternative food networks, farmer producer company, small farmers, Telangana, food system, organic farming

Introduction

Agriculture is a significant sector in the Indian economy, with 16.5 % of the 2016 GDP coming from agriculture. 51% of individuals employed in India work in agriculture, and the role of the farmer has historically been important in India, especially since the Green Revolution in the 1960s. Since 1965, "the gross cropped area of India has increased by approximately 15%" (Sarkar et. al, 2011, p. 419). Additionally, there has been a large increase in inputs related to agriculture, but at the same time, employment on farms has decreased because of the rise of large corporate farms (Sarkar et. al., 2011, p. 419).

Agriculture in India is also important because it is closely linked with availability of and access to healthy food. The agricultural sector in India produces more than 50% of income in rural areas, and about 58% of Indian workers state that their primary employment is within the agricultural sector (Kadiya et. al, 2014, p. 44). Other developing nations in Southeast Asia also heavily rely on agriculture for both economic development and access to healthy food. However, both public and private investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure has decreased since the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, which has led to an uneven change in agricultural practices throughout India (Ittyera, 2013, p. 5). In turn, these uneven changes have caused issues with food access for many individuals, especially small and marginal farmers who own land less than 2 ha. (Trebbin, 2012, p. 415).

Rise of Agribusiness and Following Effects

Other changes that are occurring in the agricultural industry that have affected small farmers are the consolidation of land ownership, and the rise of agribusiness. The term "agribusiness" was coined by John H. Davis in 1955, and has often been seen as being

synonymous with the term "agriculture". However, for the purpose of this paper, agribusiness is defined as the business of agriculture, including all processes of the food system and the supply chain of food. Agribusiness has fundamentally affected the food system and its processes worldwide. Compared to small farmers, agribusinesses often have access to more resources, including money, employees, and arable land, that allow them to efficiently produce, transport and market large quantities of food. Along with the rise of large agribusinesses has come the increased use of farm technology for food production processes. This phenomenon can be referred to as the "industrialization" of agriculture. Because of the rising industrialization of agriculture, the supply chain of food is changing, and large multi-national corporations are gaining power, "to dictate not only price but also production practices…" (Hendrickson, 2005, p. 276). Thus, small farmers are being forced to keep up with the lower-priced food, produced by large corporations with access to greater resources (Hendrickson, 2005, p. 277). In India specifically, the industrialization of agriculture can be seen in relation to the liberalization of the national economy in 1991. As Agoramoorthy et al. (2012) state, "…small landholders are the worst affected by the economic liberalization policies…" (p. 88). Although 93% of farmers in India own small farms, they control only 55% of the arable farmland in the country (Agoramoorthy et. al, 2012, p. 88). Additionally, the 1.6% of farmers in India who own farms greater than 10 hectares, control as much as 17.4% of the land (Agoramoorthy et. al., 2012, p. 88). With these changes in the Indian agricultural sector, many small farmers are being forced to accept lower prices for their crops, and are pushed to grow greater quantities of food. Additionally, Trebbin (2012) argues that because "corporate enterprises control the means of production and the output, and capture most of the value circulating in the system," small farmers are at risk of "becoming simple pieceworkers on their land" (p. 413).

The rise of agribusinesses and the industrialization of agriculture have also greatly affected the agri-supply chain of food. The agri-supply chain includes the processes of production, processing, transport, distribution, and selling of food. In a traditional agri-supply chain model, many stakeholders are involved in different processes of the agri-supply chain, meaning that there are many intermediaries (also referred to as "middlemen") standing between the producers and the consumers of food.

Despite the negative effects on small farmers in India in recent years, in the newest Indian state of Telangana, small and "marginal" farmers play a very important role in the local food system. Out of a total of 55.54 Lakh farm holdings in Telangana, 61.9% of these farm holdings are considered "marginal" and 23.9% of farm holdings are considered "small" (Reddy, n.d.).

Alternative Food Networks

In response to the changes in agriculture discussed above, alternative food networks (AFNs) have been created and grown worldwide as a way to empower and support small and marginalized farmers. Generally, AFNs are any program with a goal of providing an alternative to the industrial agrifood model (Maye and Kirwan, 2010, p. 1). These programs have arisen with a focus on providing "health food to consumers and at the same time enabl[ing] small producers to sustain a decent livelihood from farming" (Osswald, 2013, pp. 1-2). The agriculture sector in India has experienced the introduction of a variety of AFNs such as: community-supported agriculture (CSA), consumer-producer cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, farmers markets, etc. In the context of Indian agriculture, these programs have served a purpose of reconnecting producers and consumers of food, as well as resisting against an industrialized and

concentrated food system (Osswald, 2013, p. 2). Through the manipulation of the supply chain and the elimination of the intermediaries, more producers are able to sell their food locally for a fair price. Additionally, more consumers are able to access more local food and have greater knowledge of where, how, and by whom their food is grown. Many of these programs are specifically focused on organic small-scale farming, including farmers who are located near city-centers (Hanisch and Osswald, 2012, pp. 4-5).

However, AFNs are most often small-scale alternatives to the mainstream realities of the food system. Therefore, in this study of consumer and producer relationships in AFN programs, it is important to understand that according to Stevenson et al (2007), AFNs are defined as builder work. This means that they do not benefit and affect all individuals in society, and only individuals with a certain status have access to their positive gains and advantages. When doing work to change the food system on a broader level, it must be considered that builder work, despite its positive benefits, is not the most efficient or widespread way to create positive change in the food system on a larger societal level. Additionally, AFNs are not always as successful as they may appear through the primary discourse in scholarly literature. Shepherd (2007) does note cooperative programs as being one way of carrying the "linking farmers to markets" approach (which will be discussed later in this paper) but warns against the generalization of success from a small number of cooperatives, "to justify further investment to try to replicate that elsewhere. Unfortunately…the track record of cooperative development has often been disappointing" (p. 7). With this understanding of the greater context of AFNs in mind, this paper will discuss a type of AFN called a farmer producer company, in the context of Indian agriculture.

Farmer Producer Companies (FPCs)

FPCs play a significant role in bringing together small farmers and providing them with resources that allow them to be successful. Essentially, a farmer producer company is a formal group through which small farmers are connected with each other, and provided with support and resource to help them farm more efficiently, and receive higher returns for their produce. It is an attempt to blend industry and agriculture, and connect small farmers with retailers (Trebbin, 2012, pp. 411-412). FPCs can be seen as a specific type of farmer producer organization, as Cherukuri and Reddy (2014) note that farmer producer organizations in general have different purposes – they can be formed in order to build relationships between members, for business and marketing relationships, or a combination (p. 5). The farmer producer company in itself is a for-profit business, and must be formally recognized.

Over time, in India, specific laws regarding FPCs have changed the context through which they operate on a day-to-day basis. One critical aspect of FPCs is that they are completely separate from the government. According to a 1995 Andhra Pradesh law surrounding farmer producer organizations, no state representatives are permitted to be involved in the organization or have any control over its activities. The leadership for FPCs comes from within the community, and the board of directors is nominated by participating community members (Trebbin, 2012, p. 418). Nongovernmental organizations typically play a significant role in establishing and facilitating the operations of FPCs and farmer organizations in general (Trebbin, 2012, p. 421). Farmer producer organizations that are fun by “external service providers” such as nongovernmental organizations can be referred to as “exogenous” (Cherukuri and Reddy, 2014, p. 3).

Trebbin (2012) notes that FPCs often provide a variety of services to their members, including but not limited to: organizational services, production services, marketing services, financial services, and policy advocacy (p. 414). While FPCs are often focused on creating a profit-centric model for their members, they also have the ability to "nurse an entrepreneurial spirit at the community level," and motivate small farmers in a positive way (Trebbin, 2012, p. 415). Additionally, it is common for farmer producer organizations in general to share knowledge of cultivation through both formal and informal agricultural training (Cherukuri and Reddy, 2014, p. 7). Because FPCs operate at a local level, they can be considered "critical for local food security," as their farming practices affect the food available in their local communities (Trebbin, 2012, p. 417).

Sahaja Aharam Producer Company Limited

This research will be a case study, focusing on the experiences of specific farmers who are involved in the Sahaja Aharam Producer Company Limited. Sahaja Aharam is a farmer producer company run by a nongovernmental organization called the Center for Sustainable Agriculture, based in Hyderabad, Telangana. Sahaja Aharam is a program that links farmers to unique retail outlets – specific Sahaja Aharam stores in Hyderabad. The Center for Sustainable Agriculture states that one of its main goals is to "increas[e] market access to farmers to get a better share of consumer price" (Sahaja Aharam, n.d., Annexure-II).

The products sold through Sahaja Aharam are branded specifically with their name and logo. Sahaja Aharam procures and sells not only fruits and vegetables, but also secondary processed foods such as: spice powders, and cold pressed oils, as well as tertiary processed foods such as: pickles, masala powders, fruit jams, etc. (Sahaja Aharam, n.d., Annexure-II).

Additionally, they procure, process and sell non-food items such as health care products, personal care products, and seeds (Sahaja Aharam, n.d., p. 4). There are currently 11 Sahaja Aharam stores throughout India – eight of those stores are in Hyderabad. The first Sahaja Aharam store was first opened in 2010 (Hanisch and Osswald, 2012, p. 9). Seven out of eight stores located in Hyderabad were opened within the last year; this is important to note because the market for Sahaja Aharam's products is evidently expanding, and the program has experienced a variety of changes over the past year alongside the opening of seven new stores.

Sahaja Aharam functions in three states in India – Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. The farmer producer cooperatives within the larger FPC are arranged by geographic area. All farmers involved bring their produce to specific collection sites in their respective districts, so that the sorting and grading process can occur at a central location (see appendix B for participants' districts). After sorting and grading, Sahaja Aharam vehicles transport the produce from the collection sites to Hyderabad. This research will focus specifically on the farmers that Sahaja Aharam works with in the state of Telangana.

The overall goal of this research is to understand if and how Sahaja Aharam is improving the lives of the farmers they work with, to examine more broadly how farmer producer companies can support small and marginal farmers in India. A key part of this study includes amplifying the voices and experiences of the farmers who were interviewed. Given the current climate of agriculture, where many small farmers specifically feel marginalized and are lacking access to resources and support, it is important that this research not only examines the impact of their involvement in the farmer producer company, but also gives participants a space to share their experiences. Additionally, this research will try to understand how this FPC is working to

not only support small farmers currently, but also creating more economically and ecologically sustainable models to help small farmers succeed in the long run.

Organic Farming

Because organic farming will be discussed later in this report, it is important to understand its background and relevance in the context of India. According to the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP), organic farming is defined as "a system of agriculture without the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides with an environmentally and socially responsibly approach…preserving the reproductive and regenerative capacity of the soil, good plant nutrition, and sound soil management…" (APEDA, accessed 10 March 2017). In India specifically, the organic market has been growing at about 25-30% per year. In 2016, 1.35 Metric Tons of certified organic products were produced in India, including a variety of food products such as pulses, vegetables, millets, sugarcane, spices, etc. (APEDA, accessed 10 March 2017). However, as of 2010, land certified as organic through PGS (the Participatory Guarantee System) only constitutes 0.3% of India's total agricultural land (Ramesh et. al, 2010, p. 1191).

Despite this low percentage of certified organic land, conversion to organic farming is on the rise. Specifically for problems that many farmers in India face— high production cost, competition with large agribusiness, as well as environmental and ecological problems such as high incidence of pests and soil fertility issues— organic farming is seen as the solution (Panneerselvam et al., 2011, p. 157). However, there have been issues with adoption because of perceived challenges to organic farming, such as: decreased yield, a "lack of technical knowledge" about organic manures and bio fertilizers.

Methods

This study will incorporate the use of both primary and secondary data. Secondary data consists of mainly scholarly articles from peer-reviewed academic journals. Other literature used in this study includes grey literature, including information published online by organic retailers and other organizations, as well as literature provided from the Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

Primary data consists of interviews conducted with farmers involved with the Center for Sustainable Agricultures' Sahaja Aharam program. Six formal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual farmers, as well as one group interview. Access to participants was obtained through the Center for Sustainable Agriculture. It is important to note that all participants had a previously established relationship with the Center for Sustainable Agriculture and the Sahaja Aharam program. Interviews were conducted over two days: April 21st and 22nd 2017. The researcher composed a set of questions to be asked to each interviewee. However, while a similar set of questions was asked to each participant, there were different follow-up questions and different foci of the interviews, depending on the participants' responses.

Participants were asked beforehand by the interpreter about their willingness to participate in this study, and the interpreter arranged specific interview times and dates with willing participants.

Each interview was conducted in the farmer's respective village. Yadava Reddy, an employee of the Center for Sustainable Agriculture, who interpreted interviews and organized the site visits, accompanied the researcher. Six interviews were conducted in Telugu and translated by Yadava Reddy. One interview, with participant three, was conducted in English.

Verbal consent was obtained from all participants involved before beginning. Because of the context in which the data collection occurred, verbal consent was more culturally appropriate than written consent. Before the interview began, participants were informed that the information they shared would be used in a research study. It was stated that each participant had the right to decline answering any question by which he felt uncomfortable, and had the right to end the interview at any time by informing the researcher and/or interpreter. For the purpose of this study, participants will remain anonymous in order to protect their identity as members of the small farming community in Telangana.

Additionally, five out of the seven interviews conducted were recorded and later transcribed. Verbal consent was also obtained for permission to record the five interviews. Written notes were taken for the two interviews that were not recorded. In the subsequent sections of this report, quotes will be included from the interviews that were recorded and transcribed, from participants one through five. However, it is important to note that the interpreter translated direct quotes in this study from Telugu into English, and thus the findings of this study are limited in that respect. Inevitably, there is a possibility that the researcher may misinterpret quotes and experiences shared. Because of the nature of translation in the field, none of the included quotes are verbatim, per se, what the participants said. Despite this, it is the hope that by using direct quotes as often as possible, the participants' perspectives will be maintained as much as possible through this research.

This study was conducted using grounded theory. The collected data was analyzed from a sociological lens, with a focus on people, their relationships, and intersectionality of different societal institutions, including: work, economy, family, and education.

Lastly, it is important to note that this study is limited in scope for multiple reasons. First, the period of time in which it was conducted was limited. In order to truly gain an accurate, in-depth understanding about the research topic, more time should be allotted for fieldwork, including interviews and observation in different settings.

Findings

Participant Profiles

First, a profile of each participant will be presented, discussing the main themes from their interview. The purpose of this method of sharing findings is to highlight the importance of the participant's experience and the information he chose to share during his interview.

Participant one – Zapthisingaipalli, Telangana. Participant one is a male farmer whose farm is located in Zapthisingaipalli. He is middle-aged and lives with his wife and younger daughter, as his older daughter is married. He started working with Sahaja Aharam four years ago, but began changing to organic farming practices nine years ago. Through an environmental education organization named Trees, he was connected with Sahaja Aharam. The main crops grown on his farm include tomato, brinjal (eggplant), and paddy. There are also four cows on his farm that provide milk, and waste for fertilizer. He now serves as the director of his local branch of the Sahaja Aharam producer company located in Mulugu, Telangana, and was elected to this position in 2014 by nomination from fellow farmers. Some of his responsibilities as the director include managing the membership of the producer company, and coordinating with local farmers to help them sell their vegetables with Sahaja Aharam.

Overall, this farmer felt that his involvement with Sahaja Aharam was very important for him and his family's well being – he enjoys growing totally organically because of the health

benefits, and being able to sell his produce for a higher price with Sahaja Aharam. Additionally, through his role as the local director, he is often interacting with other farmers and they are sharing their knowledge and experiences. Thus, this participant is able to learn many new things, and also understand and share the challenges that many small farmers face.

Participant two – Ksheelasagar, Telangana. Participant two lives with his wife, daughter, and son, and his farm is located in Ksheelasagar. On his farm, he mainly grows coccinia, bitter gourd, and curry leaves. He also has two cows.

He shared that his son's chronic blood illness plays a large role in his life – he spends much time going to and from the hospital, and a significant amount of money for needed medical care. Before he began working with Sahaja Aharam, he had procured a significant amount of debt, because of both his son's illness, and high costs of chemicals. This participant shared that it was a difficult time for him, both professionally, with his farm work, and personally, with his family and managing his son's illness and the finances.

This farmer now feels extremely passionate about growing organically. To the extent that he was approached by local supermarkets that were hoping to form a partnership and procure and sell his produce in their stores. He mentioned that they approached him four separate times, and he said no each time, because they wanted him to use chemicals to grow the produce. He said, "four times they have come…they wanted to use me as a resource person, and I have not agreed. I am doing organic farming and don't want to do chemical farming…" (participant two, 2017, personal interview). Some of the reasons this participant feels so passionately about organic farming is because of the health benefits for him and his family, and also how it is less difficult to control pests and disease on his farm, compared to when he previously used chemical pesticides.

Participant three – Advi Masjid, Telangana. Participant three is unlike the rest of the participants, because he is educated at the doctorate level, speaks English, and does not do day-to-day farm work, but simply owns farmland and employs farmers in Advi Masjid. This interview was conducted in English and the participant provided a different perspective on both organic farming and Sahaja Aharam.

As the landowner of his farmland for three years, he is employing 20-25 farmers, who were all previously working on the same land before he procured it. He shared that they used to grow grapes on this land, and used many chemicals. Now, after transitioning to organic farming practices, tomato, cabbage, cauliflower and bitter gourd are the main crops grown on this land. He began working with Sahaja Aharam around four months ago, in January 2017, as they approached him asking to procure some of the organically grown vegetables from his land.

This participant is passionate about organic farming, and has extensive knowledge about the local demand for organic products.

Participant four – Narsimpalli, Telangana. This participant has a farm in Narsimpalli, and unlike other interviews, this interview was conducted at the participant's home, in the vicinity of his wife, youngest son, and other extended family. This farmer has buffalo on his farm, and is currently growing paddy, although he rotates the land each year for soil fertility purposes, and will grow different types of vegetables from year to year.

Four years ago this farmer began working with Sahaja Aharam, and after one year of adopting organic farming practices, he began selling produce with the producer company. Evidently, when asked about his involvement with Sahaja Aharam, this farmer mainly talked about organic farming and the changes he saw on his farm from this large transformation in practice.

Currently, because this participant is growing only paddy this season, he noted that he is unable to sell to Sahaja Aharam – they only procure from him when he sells vegetables. Most of the paddy he grows is for his own family's consumption, but the excess he sells in the open market for a lower price.

When asked about changes he would like to see in the future, this farmer was passionately stating that he hopes Sahaja Aharam will take all of his crops in the future – not only his paddy, but also larger amounts of vegetables in the seasons in which they are grown.

Participant five – Advi Masjid, Telangana. Participant five is a farmer from the village of Advi Masjid, The main crops he grows are maize, tomato, okra, spinach, bottle gourd, and eggplant. Because of the financial problems of buying and using chemical inputs, this farmer believes that now is the right time to begin practicing organic farming. With proper support, training, and encouragement, he believes that farmers can be successful.

This participant began working with Sahaja Aharam four years ago, but he stopped using chemicals on his farm in 1998. In addition to taking care of his farmland, this participant also spends his time going around to other local farms and teaching farmers about the different aspects of organic farming. Although he enjoys spreading the word of organic farming, this participant believes that the government should be playing a larger role in helping small farmers, and specifically in teaching them how to do organic farming. To this participant, farming is highly integrated with the health of human beings and the entire earth – healthy and organic farming practices will help us take care of both our communities, and also the earth.

Participant six – Enabavi, Telangana. This participant is a landowner and farmer in Enabavi, which is a village that is 100% organic. The journey to organic farming was very important for this farmer and his entire village. Fifteen years ago, they encountered a persistent

pest, which was unable to be managed with chemical pesticides. He began his relationship with Sahaja Aharam and the Center for Sustainable Agriculture before it was even called as such – in the early 2000s, CSA was a part of the Centre for World Solidarity. They approached this participant and provided him with knowledge of non-pesticidal management (NPM) techniques for managing the caterpillars and other pests.

From 2000 – 2005, this farmer was developing his use of NPM techniques, in addition to practicing new ways of maintaining soil fertility naturally, rather than using chemical fertilizers. By 2005, the entirety of Enabavi was fully organic, employing knowledge carried from previous generations who had practiced organic farming, as well as the knowledge provided from the Centre for World Solidarity. After Enabavi became an organic village, the Sahaja Aharam program was started, and they started procuring produce from the farmer. He noted that Sahaja Aharam program supported his organic practice not only by helping him receive a better price for his produce, but also helping him (and Enabavi in general) to receive official organic certification through their investment of both time and money.

Enabavi is a unique village because it was the first certified organic village in the state of Andhra Pradesh, and has received quite a bit of publicity for this. Because of the farmer's long relationship with Sahaja Aharam and the Center for Sustainable Agriculture, he has been able to benefit greatly from both organic farming, and the support and publicity that Sahaja Aharam provided for Enabavi.

Participant seven – Siripuram, Telangana. The interview with participant seven was conducted on farmland in Kallem, Telangana, in the presence of other local farmers. This farmer is from Siripuram and mainly grows two types of paddy – a heavy variety, and a fine quality

variety. He noted that through monthly meetings, him and other local farmers involved in the Sahaja Aharam cooperative are able to share knowledge and experiences.

This farmer is still in the process of transitioning his land to be grown in a fully organic way. Out of 14 acres, currently four acres are cultivated with organic practices, and the other 10 acres are still cultivated with chemicals. The participant noted that he began transitioning to organic farming three years ago, and is completing this transition gradually in order to minimize risk. He stated that at the beginning of his relationship with Sahaja Aharam three years ago, there were 20-30 members of the local FPC, but over time it has grown to include over 75 farmers.

Over time, this participant has seen a significant reduction in the cost of his cultivation, which is why he is continuing to transition his land so that eventually, all 14 acres will be cultivated organically. This participant noted the importance of Sahaja Aharam's program for providing visibility and publicity for him and his farm. He shared that their marketing efforts have not only allowed them to sell with Sahaja Aharam, but also has attracted new customers who come directly to his farm to buy organic grain and produce.

Emerging Themes from Interviews

All seven participants shared that their involvement with Sahaja Aharam benefitted them in a variety of ways. See below for a list of benefits, and select quotes from interviews that exemplified them. Each participant put an emphasis on a different benefit or positive change they experienced when they began working with Sahaja Aharam, which will be discussed further through the discussion of themes. The benefits can be placed into a few key categories depending on which aspect of life they affected for the farmer, but mainly they are divided by whether they occurred because of adoption of organic farming practices, or directly from the Sahaja Aharam Producer Company Limited itself.

Table 1: Benefits from Sahaja Aharam

Benefit Category	Specific benefit	Exemplary Quote
Financial	Increased selling price for crops through Sahaja Aharam, contributing to an increase in yearly income	"They have made the linkages with the market, and they have helped us. And they have collected from the different farmers, different vegetables, and have added some stores. In that way SA made it possible to sell our produce for a higher premium." (Participant five, 2017, personal interview)
		"Vegetables we are getting more price, compared to others. 20-30% increase of the market price. And there will be no charges there. [In the open market], 10% commission will be there, the market commission, that is not there. They also benefit from this — increase in price, and they will not charge anything" (Participant one, 2017, personal interview)
Community Support	Gaining formal support and knowledge about organic farming practices through Sahaja Aharam training	"they used to go around in the fields, and they used to tell how to [organically] produce, and organized demonstrations. And also they are saying that there is a market for the future… these people are training and giving knowledge." (Participant five, 2017, personal interview)
		"while we were producing vegetables, people visited our farm…actually they informed that you can produce organically, they informed that. But we do not follow sometime, but they come and they explain everything in a proper way and then we started practicing this one. These people have made me an organic farmer." (Participant two, 2017, personal interview)
	Having an opportunity to connect with other farmers and share experiences at Sahaja Aharam meetings	"…farmers [should] be part of the producer company. People need to know what the challenges of the farmers are." (Participant one, 2017, personal interview)
Publicity and Marketing	Increased publicity about the farmer's practice of organic farming	"These people have made to expose us, we are the organic farmers, they didn't know who we were. They didn't know much about us, the market, the consumers does not recognize us as organic farmers. Because of Sahaja Aharam, we have been recognized as the organic farmers." (Participant five, 2017, personal interview)

Table 2: Benefits from Conversion to Organic Farming

Benefit Category	Specific Benefit	Exemplary Quote
Financial	Decreased cultivation and production costs	"…we have reduced our cost of cultivation. 75% of costs are reduced….we used to spend on the chemicals." (Participant four, 2017, personal interview)
Environmental	Increased soil fertility	"…soil is important. We have to take care of also for the mother. Like a mother you have to take care of the soil…if you keep the soil very healthy, you protect it, then you will get the benefit." (Participant five, 2017, personal interview)
	More efficient use of water	"yeah, we [were not using] this micro-irrigation, there was a lot of water but there was no benefit. Now we are getting less water but we are able to benefit from it" (Participant two, 2017, personal interview).
Health	Ability to grow and consume food cultivated without chemicals	"I am taking very healthy food for myself, for my family. How much amount you make, you can produce a lot, but if your food is not good, then what is the use ….my food is good, I feel great, I am able to feed my family with healthy food" (participant two, 2017, personal interview)
		"My wish is that everyone has to come into this way of cultivation. So all the community will get the healthy food…If you do it in this way, there will be no other profession like agriculture" (Participant five, Advi Masjid).

Financial benefits. As exemplified above, there were two types of financial benefits that participants expressed – from selling crops with Sahaja Aharam, and from adoption of organic farming practices. All seven participants discussed the increase in income they experienced from selling their crops with Sahaja Aharam. Compared to the open market, participants shared that Sahaja Aharam provides them between 20-40% more for the same products sold (participants one-seven, 2017, personal interviews). This was evidently a key benefit for participants, especially because three out of seven explicitly indicated that they were experiencing financial

problems before they began selling with Sahaja Aharam. Multiple factors contributed to these financial problems, but participants expressed that their financial problems were felt mainly because of the poor producer price they received from selling in the open market, and from large amounts of money being spent on chemical fertilizers and pesticides. These financial problems were (and are still being, for some participants) mitigated by a combination of the higher Sahaja Aharam producer prices, and adoption of organic farming practices.

Specifically, participant five shared that his financial issues were previously so severe, that he had to sell some of his land to repay his debts. He shared that through high chemical pesticide use, many pests were becoming resistant and he was having continual pest infestations on many of his crops. This perpetuated the cycle of buying large quantities of chemical pesticides, having pests become resistant, and then spending even more money on pesticides. Organic farming was the solution to this problem for this farmer – now, he does not have debts, is able to control pests more easily and in a more financially efficient way (participant five, 2017, personal interview).

Transition to organic farming. All seven farmers interviewed indicated that when they initially started working with CSA and the Sahaja Aharam program, they were approached by the organization, rather than seeking out this partnership. For the farmers interviewed, all seven associated their relationship with Sahaja Aharam with practice and knowledge of organic farming.

Because all participants were previously using chemicals in their cultivation practice, they discussed their transition to organic farming and how that process affected their work. Especially for the four participants who began organic farming with the assistance and training of Sahaja Aharam, it was remarked that they were doubtful of the feasibility of converting to

organic cultivation. Participant three shared that, "It is not easy to change to organic just like that, it takes many years" (2017, personal interview). This statement was echoed among other participants; while each farmer noted the benefits of organic farming vs. chemical farming, they communicated that initially, the transition was difficult and they were doubtful about its possibility for success. They had to learn an entirely different method of cultivation, learn how to prepare *jeevanmutham* and other bio-fertilizers, and practice new methods of controlling pests without chemical pesticides. Participant four noted that when he was transitioning to organic farming, he, "stopped applying chemical fertilizers and chemical pesticides. We used jeevamrutham and instead of chemical fertilizers, we apply neem oil, chili garlic, and other things too" (2017, personal interview). Participant six spoke in-depth about his experience with bio-pesticides such as pheromone traps and neem seed kernel extract, and how he learned to use these NPM methods when he began organic farming in the early 2000s (2017, personal interview).

Another challenge that some participants encountered during their transition to organic farming was a reduction in yield. Participants three and four specifically noted that when they first transitioned, they initially saw a reduction of yield. However, both participants additionally shared that after observation over multiple seasons, the yield began to rise again and eventually stabilize.

Sahaja Aharam employees helped spread information about organic farming, and specifically jeevamrutham. Support from Sahaja Aharam was important to participant one during his transition to organic farming. He said, "They are advising, they are organizing us…and they are helping with production practices" (Participant one, 2017, Personal interview). He highlighted that going through this transition with the support of Sahaja Aharam made it a more

enjoyable process overall. Participant two shared this perspective – when he began his partnership with Sahaja Aharam in 2010, Sahaja Aharam supplied the materials and information to support his transition to organic farming. He noted that, "they came and demonstrated it here, how to prepare jeevamrutham… they organized a meeting in the village for all the farmers…and I attended meetings and trainings" (2017, personal interview). Additionally, although participant five was already practicing organic farming when he began working with Sahaja Aharam, he believes their support in helping more farmers adopt organic methods is important. He shared that he is happy for Sahaja Aharam's presence in his community, because "they are going around in the fields…training and giving knowledge" (Participant five, 2017, personal interview).

Participant seven shared that at the beginning of his transition to organic farming in 2014, he partnered with a local NGO, separate from Sahaja Aharam, and participated in a buyback agreement. He would receive 6500 Rs. per quintal (1000 kilograms) grown organically, compared to the then-market-price of 4000 Rs. Per quintal. This financial agreement was a significant incentive for the farmer to produce organically, highlighting the fact that financial benefits were considered to be highly important. With the combination of the buyback agreement, and Sahaja Aharam's training program, he began the transition to organic farming (participant seven, 2017, personal interview).

Effects of organic farming. As shown in Table 2 above, participants shared a variety of reasons why they felt that they were benefitting from organic cultivation on their farms.

First, environmentally, there were clear changes noticed by the participants in soil health and fertility, as well as efficient use of water. Two participants communicated that they implemented micro irrigation systems that allowed them to efficiently use of a limited supply of water. While it was shared that the full transition to organic can often be a lengthy process,

participants who have been practicing organic farming for more than three years, indicated that their soil is healthier and more fertile than it was previously.

Another reason organic farming was preferred by all of the participants, is because they were able to use their own resources on the farm, and didn't have to purchase inputs with unknown contents and chemicals. This change was a source of great pride for some farmers interviewed, indicated by statements such as, "Now in the process we are very happy now. We are doing with our own resources we are doing our own agriculture. And my family members are able to eat healthy food" (Participant five, 2017, personal interview). Having an understanding of how their food was grown without the use of chemicals allowed these farmers to feel confident that they were producing healthy food (see table 2 above for more quotes).

Additionally, four participants shared that managing pests became easier and less costly after transitioning to organic farming. Participant two stated, "I used to work more hard to control pests and disease. But now, we are not working that much because it is good…now we are feeling very comfortable, the work and burden is reducing" (2017, personal interview). Participant one shared as well that he found his burden of daily work to decreased, which meant that he didn't need to rely on paid labor workers as often as he previously did.

Room for improvement. Despite the enthusiasm conveyed by participants about the benefits they have experienced from their involvement with Sahaja Aharam, it was also made clear that there is more work to do in order for the participants to feel fully supported. Four participants expressed anticipation that Sahaja Aharam will further expand and sell larger amounts of their crops. This was a commonly discussed theme among these four participants, as each of them feel negatively about having to sell most of their crops in the open market for low prices. Sahaja Aharam is procuring different percentages of total yield from each farm, ranging

from 10-50%. However, the four farmers who wished that Sahaja Aharam would procure more from them were each selling only between 10-20% of their produce with the FPC.

Participant one shared that he hopes Sahaja Aharam will create a pickup service for farmers, so that they don't have to transport their goods to a central procurement center. Currently, he has to transport his own vegetables from his farm in Zapthisingaipalli to the closest collection center, in Mulugu, in order for Sahaja Aharam to collect, sort, grade, and eventually sell his produce (Participant one, 2017, personal interview).

Challenges of small farmers in Telangana. A common theme that emerged from all seven interviews, were that there are numerous challenges that small farmers in India face on a daily basis. Two participants – participant one and participant five, were very vocal about the fact that many farmers lead difficult lives, performing physically demanding work each day trying to maintain their livelihood. Participant one believed that it was important for farmers to be a part of FPOs so that they have a chance to share their challenges and have their voices to be heart. Participant five believed that many of the challenges small farmers face are due to their excessive use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. He believes strongly in organic farming and the importance of taking care of the soil and the earth, and feels that so many farmers are suffering financially because of their "high use of fertilizers and chemicals…" which is causing them to "lose their land because of their debts, and still they are going to get more loans…" (Participant five, 2017, personal interview).

When asked about personal challenges the participants face in their work, participant one noted that his main challenge is procuring laborers to help, especially during the harvesting season. He said that, "getting laborers is difficult and they are charging very high [amounts]" (2017, personal interview).

Participant two explained that water is a large challenge for him—over the last 10 years, availability of water has decreased significantly. While the use of micro irrigation has allowed him to benefit more from smaller quantities of water, he is currently not able to grow paddy because there is not enough water.

Discussion

It was clear from both primary and secondary data, that Sahaja Aharam provides a variety of services to their members. Similarly to many other farmer producer organizations throughout India, Sahaja Aharam is concerned not only with linking producers to markets for fair compensation, but also with minimizing cultivation costs, teaching producers about organic farming, assisting with organic certification, and generally improving the welfare of the farmers involved (Cherukuri and Reddy, 2014, p. 6). From interviews with farmers, it is also evident that their involvement with the Sahaja Aharam farmer producer company is highly linked with their practice of organic farming.

Improving welfare of farmers through organic farming is a particularly important theme uncovered through these seven interviews. While all participants shared that they benefitted from their involvement with Sahaja Aharam, they shared that they benefitted equally as much, if not more, from their transition to organic farming. However, for many of the participants in this study, their transition to organic farming was a significant change that affected many aspects of their lives. The doubts that many participants had about the feasibility of organic farming and its effects were not unique. Panneerselvam et al. (2011) examined conventional farmers' perceptions of barriers to adoption of organic farming, and found that many were concerned about low yield, change in labor, and the market for organic products (p. 162). These concerns

were shared among the four farmers who began transitioning to organic farming with Sahaja Aharam. More broadly it seems that among conventional farmers, it is perceived that the transition to organic farming may be difficult and particularly challenging (despite the current challenges they may face with high chemical usage and soil fertility). Additionally, there is often a lack of knowledge about organic farming practices, specifically regarding bio-fertilizers and NPM techniques. These perceived challenges and lack of knowledge could both be deterrents for many farmers who are considering adoption or organic farming, unless they have support and/or training programs such as those Sahaja Aharam provides. For farmers in the Panneerselvam et al. (2011) study, those who had external support when transitioning to organic farming were, "motivated to improve the production, environment, and health factors…" (p. 166). Therefore, it may be beneficial that Sahaja Aharam is providing external support to assist with the transition, as it motivates farmers to adopt organic farming in order to improve different aspects of their farm.

Additionally, from a broader market perspective, Sahaja Aharam is able to provide quality control for their products through ensuring that the farmers they are procuring from are using organic farming methods. This creates even further market demand, especially for "buyers who are looking for ways to ensure traceability," (Cherukuri and Reddy, 2014, p. 6). Thus, the benefits from organic farming not only affect producers, but further corroborate the market value of Sahaja Aharam products, and allow interested consumers to buy safe and chemical-free food (Cherukuri and Reddy, 2014, p. 6). Thus, a symbiotic relationship is developed between producers and consumers due to specifically branded Sahaja Aharam products. However, within the broader context of the market for organic products, Sahaja Aharam is functioning at a small level. While market demand for organic products is growing in India, it is unclear whether

supply of organic products by small farmers is a sustainable arrangement for farmers (Shepherd, 2007, p. 13). This ties in with the fact that four participants wished Sahaja Aharam would procure larger amounts from them. Hill (2016) notes that the demand for organic products may be smaller than expected because, "few urban consumers appreciate the importance of sustainable agriculture" (p. 7039). However, the demand for organic products in urban markets is expected to expand significantly over time, particularly for vegetables (Hanisch and Osswald, 2012, p. 8).

Despite the positive changes that participants noted from their participation in Sahaja Aharam, as well as their organic farming practices, each of them noted that they still face challenges in their work as farmers. One main issue that many participants expressed was the lack of access to other markets providing fair compensation. As stated above, all seven participants sold between 10-50% of their total yield to Sahaja Aharam. Five out of seven participants shared that the produce that is not procured by Sahaja Aharam must be sold in the "open market." The farmers noted that one of the main issues in the open market, is the lack of classification of their crops as organic. They receive prices equal to that of the same, inorganically grown products (compared to when selling through Sahaja Aharam). The open market also is not increasing compensation to producers – specifically for vegetables like tomato and brinjal—despite the fact that consumer prices have risen approximately 100% over the last 20 years (Participant one, 2017, personal interview; Dev, 2012, p. 18). The fact that Sahaja Aharam is providing a 20-30% greater price than the open market is important, because it allows him to make a profit from his farming practices whereas otherwise he would not. The "collective marketing approach" that Sahaja Aharam employs is a successful way of reducing the gap between producer and consumer price (Dev, 2012, p. 18).

Cherukuri and Reddy (2014) note that because small farmers generally lack market power, producer organizations, and FPCs in general, are an effective means through which to bring about "a stronger, collective voice" for small farmers (p. 2). Since small farmers are generally lacking market information and market access within their local communities, institutions such as NGOs play a significant role in facilitating market connections on which the small farmers' livelihoods depend (Torero, 2011, pp. 12-13). Shepherd (2007) argues additionally, that the "linking farmers to markets" approach is an effective way of modifying the current agri-supply chain, through which farmers are organized into groups in order to successfully supply to local and national markets. (p. v). Two participants shared that Sahaja Aharam not only linked them to Sahaja Aharam's specific market, but also, their publicity efforts helped the farmers become connected to more customers who were willing to pay a fair price for the produce. However, for the other five participants – access to the market is still an issue for the majority of their produce that is not procured by Sahaja Aharam. Thus, from the farmers' perspectives, there is room for improvement in Sahaja Aharam's system of linking them and introducing them to new markets.

Further, many NGOs are working to create alternative solutions to the issues that small farmers face, but these are often short-term solutions that don't necessarily achieve in uncovering the roots of the farmers' problems (Shepherd, 2007, p. 13). Especially because the FPC examined in this study is exogamous, and coordinated and operated by an NGO, it is important to ensure that from Sahaja Aharam, "…the collective gain is more than the individual gain. The collective gain could and should ideally be both in terms of economic viability and ecological sustainability" (Cherukuri and Reddy, 2014, p. 12). Evidently, organic farming, from the perspectives of practicing farmers, seems to be an ecologically sustainable solution. However, it is the responsibility of the Center for Sustainable Agriculture, which runs the Sahaja Aharam

program, to ensure that their market model is viable and able to be maintained as a long-term program. In order to keep the best interests of participants in mind, FPCs need to be organized in a way that anticipates changes in the market, and consistently looks for new ways to expand and further support its participants. Existing literature supports the idea that FPCs have the potential to contribute to "sustainable development of the food systems of expanding metropolitan areas…" if they continue and grow their work and scope over time (Hanisch and Osswald, 2012, p. 9).

Conclusions and Future Study

This study examined how farmers perceive their participation in Sahaja Aharam, a farmer producer company based in Hyderabad, Telangana. Through qualitative interviews with seven farmers who are formally involved in this FPC, it was evident that involvement in the Sahaja Aharam programs has changed the lives of farmers in many ways. Many farmers received assistance in converting from chemical farming to organic farming, which allowed them to benefit financially, environmentally, and in their personal health and happiness. Additionally, Sahaja Aharam links their participating farmers to markets through which they receive a higher producer price, shortening the typically large gap between consumer price and producer price found in markets throughout India. Overall, through these benefits, the small farmers involved in this FPC were able to improve their livelihood. Through providing access to fair-paying markets, knowledge of organic farming, and other forms of support, Sahaja Aharam as an FPC has allowed its members to find greater success in their farming practices and overall lives. However, through the interviews it was made clear that small farmers in Telangana still face many challenges. Their involvement with Sahaja Aharam linked them with a fair-paying market when they had previously been struggling with market access. Despite this, many participants

expressed that there should be an opportunity to expand the program and further improve these farmers' access to markets, which is a key factor in ensuring that they can maintain their livelihood through their farm work.

However, whether or not the Sahaja Aharam program finds success in the future is dependent on the expansion of the urban organic market, as well as their ability to connect with and support farmers via long-term relationships.

Due to the fact that this project was limited in scope, the researcher provides a few recommendations for further research. First, in order to understand why participants began working with Sahaja Aharam, research must be conducted about how this FPC chooses new members, and what adverse conditions their members are facing prior to their engagement in the program. Next, it should be considered that the Sahaja Aharam program as a whole is less than 10 years old. It has expanded greatly and impacted many farmers during this time, but future research should examine the success of this program, and others of the like, over long periods of time. This will help understand whether FPCs and farmer producer organizations as a whole are a sustainable model for supporting the work of small farmers in India.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1) Tell me about your family. What are the names of your family members?
2) How long have you been living/working here?
3) What are the main crops you grow?
4) What is a typical day like for you?
    a. What kind of work do you do on your farm?
    b. Who else works on the farm, and what kind of daily work do they do?
5) When did you start working with Sahaja Aharam?
    a. How did you get involved in the program?
    b. What was the transition like for you?
6) What has changed for you since becoming involved with Sahaja Aharam?
    a. What benefits have you seen from your involvement in this program?
    b. Is Sahaja Aharam impacting your professional life and/or personal life? How?
7) How could Sahaja Aharam better support you?
8) What do you see as the biggest challenge for you as a farmer? What about the biggest challenge for your farm in general?
9) What skills are needed, from your experience, to be a successful farmer?
10) Why is organic farming important to you?
11) Do you want your children to work in agriculture? Why or why not?
12) Is there anything else you would like to share, or would like me to know about you or your experiences?

Appendix B: Participant Information

Name	Village Name	District	Main crops grown at time of interview	Beginning of work with Sahaja Aharam
Participant one	Zapthisingaipalli	Mulugu	Tomato, brinjal, paddy	2014
Participant two	Ksheelasagar	Mulugu	Coccinia, bitter gourd	2010
Participant three	Advi Masjid	Mulugu	tomato, cabbage, cauliflower bitter gourd	Early 2017
Participant four	Narsimpalli	Mulugu	Paddy	2012-2013
Participant five	Advi Masjid	Mulugu	Maize, tomato, okra, spinach, brinjal	2013
Participant six	Enabavi	Kallem	Paddy, cotton, vegetables	2000
Participant seven	Siripuram	Kallem	Paddy, brinjal, tomato	2014